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STATE PASS TO EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: TURKEY PREPARING TO BREAK SILENCE ON THE US CARGO HUB REQUEST?

REF: 16 JUNE 2004 WALD/BASBUG LETTER

Classified By: Ambassador Eric S. Edelman, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (S) Following nine months of silence since the US formally asked Turkey to allow the US to establish a cargo hub at Incirlik Air Base for the transit of cargo in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), recent public comments by Turkish officials may suggest that a decision is forthcoming. Press coverage of the June 2004 cargo hub request was reinvigorated following a March 23, 2005 comment by ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) MP Murat Mercan during a panel discussion at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy in Washington suggesting that a decision on the US request would be made "very soon." (Note: This has been the talking point with visitors since December.) Other GOT officials have made subsequent comments reinforcing this idea. In a public statement on March 28, Government spokesman Cemil Cicek noted that the issue was not raised during the March 27 Cabinet meeting but could be discussed at the next meeting, and on March 29 several papers suggested that PM Erdogan will receive a briefing on the request.

2. (S) Press speculation on the reason for a positive GOT decision ranges from a GOT extension of an olive branch to mend bilateral relations or of a sweetener to encourage USG and Congressional efforts to vote down the annual Armenian Genocide Resolution when it comes up for a vote in April. Some of the press reporting has included wild exaggerations of what we requested, including suggestions we want to use Incirlik to attack Iran or Syria. Whether this is anti-Americanism at its worst, or some PR ploy to allow the government to portray whatever it finally approves as sharply constrained, is not clear.

3. (S) We would normally conclude that nine months of inaction is the Turkish equivalent of a "no." But it does seem to us that there may be movement. Although Turkish officials have not approached the Embassy directly to discuss the cargo hub, Deputy Director General for Americas Affairs Suna Ilicak did suggest to PolMilCouns that a GOT decision to favorably consider limited Incirlik access requests from the UK and South Korea boded well for the US request. However, government officials have found multiple pretexts for delaying approval, variously claiming that public statements by visiting US officials complicated the decision or suggesting that the US should provide something in return, such as kinetic action against the PKK in Iraq. Whether the current flurry of press reports signals something different or will also fade away, remains to be seen.

4. (S) Given the history, post believes that further inquiries on our part will not advance the GOT decision process and could be misconstrued by the Turks as suggesting we have no alternative to a hub in Turkey, providing them with a perceived bargaining chip on other issues. We therefore plan to refrain from raising the matter with Turkish officials and suggest that military and Washington agencies also respond on the cargo hub only if asked. We also suggest that in any discussion we stress that the facility is useful but not essential for our missions. We will continue to watch the Turks struggle with this issue until they reach a decision or until USTRANSCOM informs us that a hub at Incirlik would no longer be useful.

5. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.  
EDELMAN